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THE AGNOSTIC.

I.

With all my being I desire to know,
Nor shall imagination's tempting glow
Lure me from reason's firm and upward road
To plunge into that vapor-haunted wood,
Where thought is lulled to sleep by heart's desire,
And fungus-lights of faith replace the fire
Of truth's lone beacon shining far on high,
In pure untainted air of reason's sky.
For ages I have struggled toward that light.
From age to age its radiance grows more bright.
A thousand centuries but mark the youth
Of thought that ever seeks eternal truth.
Far, far beyond me gleams the beacon true,
Now near and clear, now almost lost to view
When self-born tempests raise a misty cloud
To veil the eye of reason with its shroud.
Some vantage-points I've gained through centuries
 slow,
Some truth is mine, the most is yet to know.

II.

What know I of the dawn of life sublime,
That point infinitesimal of time,
That makes the unborn babe a separate "I"?
One instant but a growth, wherein doth lie

A balanced potency, to live or die,
 The instant next an entity, a whole,
 Beyond the mother's knowledge or control!
 What unknown power has weighted down the scale
 Of life, to make its potency of avail?
 Imaginative creeds perchance may say
 That in that moment ripe some soul astray
 Or else predestined, enters here to stay.
 I too may dream of things that might be so,
 But reason says, "The cause not yet we know."

III.

Is death the end of this intrinsic I?
 This conscious self that still demands the why
 Of all things, and insists upon reply?
 Shall individual consciousness be lost
 When worn or broken body pays its cost?
 When the machine fails shall the motive power
 Be also lost?—Is life then but a dower
 Of universal force, transmuted to this form,
 Evolving in the ages from the worm
 Through better mechanism, to man's estate,
 Where for the moment it must culminate?
 Shall individual life be merged, at death,
 In that great unit force that gave it breath?
 Materialism says "This must be so!"
 Agnosticism, "This not yet we know."

IV.

The consciousness of individual soul
 Is so deep-rooted that it must control
 The thought that aims to scale these dizzy heights:
 Reason may not surrender all its rights
 To immortality. It cannot see

What lies beyond the mortal boundary.
 It cannot know the things not of its sphere:
 No word of "after-death" can reach its ear;
 For if a spiritual life exist
 It is not human, and cannot persist
 In human functions when its mortal frame,
 The outward form that gave it human name,
 Is absolutely changed by nature's law,
 Disintegrated and returned to feed the maw
 Of newer life that lives upon the old
 And still springs upward from the chemic mold
 To follow nature's never-varying round
 Of life destroyed, that life may more abound.
 The spirit, if it live, has lost its kin
 With kindred spirit still immured within
 A fleshly tabernacle. No appeal
 Can be received by mind still under seal
 Of brain capacity that cannot hear
 Aught but what speaks through human reason's ear.
 Therefore, perhaps, no evidence has come
 From that unknown that lies beyond the tomb;
 No voice authentic from the dark abyss
 To which each soul must plunge at death's cold kiss.
There can be no report for "Yea" or "Nay,"
 No evidence that pointeth either way.
 I claim no faith, but while for truth I grope
 'Tis not unphilosophical to hope.

v.

What of the God that reason's mighty aid
 Imagination, has each age portrayed
 In man's own image, to make good the call
 Of reason, for a primal cause of all?
 In man's own image, so that self-bound man
 Worships himself, with but a larger span!

“God is the greater I, my self-made rod
Projected infinitely, measures God.”

The law-bound reason, circling for a cause,
Confronts itself and its own changeless laws.
Nothing can be self-caused, yet time and space
Must be eternal, as the reason's base.
Therefore the higher pantheism taught
That time and space are God, through whom is wrought
The universe, and that the natural world
Is but God's effluence to man unfurled;
That man himself, the individual I,
Is but a reflex of God's entity.
My reason finds some fallacy in this,
The juggled words of false philosophies.
It sees imagination's hand disguised
By glove of sophistry, half recognized.
It lingers o'er that hand that seems to hold
The answer to its questions manifold.
But deeper thought provokes the judgment slow.
“This may be truth, but this not yet we know.”

VI.

What is “the faith”? Saint Paul, the subtle Greek
Has made an answer, but in vain we seek
For any meaning in that wily phrase
Which to the ear of reason still conveys
The “tinkling brass and sounding cymbal” noise
Of words that aim to baffle reason's poise.
The words are hallowed by the centuries
Of faith that leans upon authorities;
The same old faith that heard the *Latin* voice
Of medieval monk or priest, and did rejoice
In that supremacy of sounding word
That spoke of supernatural to the herd,

Who, like the silly sheep obey, and hark
To crook that promises or dogs that bark.

The man agnostic cannot quite disown
The heritage of faith that was his own.
Born in him, parted from, perhaps with pain,
But never to be of himself again.
It lingers from the youthful memory still
In those strange dreams that override the will.
I too have felt the spell of Paul's strange word
Upon the heart, when outer ear has heard
The deep-voiced organ's diapason note
Make tremulous the air, and when the throat
Is closed by feeling's tide that rises high,
And for the moment clouds the reason's eye.

So, much religious faith has had its birth
In the emotion, and is only worth
Emotion's value, not to be disdained,
But to be tested, and to be restrained
When reason asks, "How know I this is so?",
And hears the futile phrase, "Believe, and thou shalt
know."

Religious faith can claim a parentage
Of crude imagination, in each age
Fostered by ignorant zeal or crafty skill
To stifle reason, and to make the will
Of man bend pliant to a mighty power,
Dreaded because unknown, as in the hour
Of half-awakened sleep we seem to see
The known, as unknown, and may even be
Half frightened by the spectral shape that leaps
From out the dream that grows while reason sleeps.
So faith has built her insubstantial homes;

While reason sleeps she rears her airy domes,
Founded sometimes upon the heart's desire,
Sometimes the fear of an eternal fire.
When reason wakes they totter to their fall,
But baseless vision fabrics, one and all.

The past is strewn with ruins of her fanes,
Often, like ancient towns, built on remains
Of older faiths, so that the mind can trace
Religion's evolution in the race.

One faith is mine, the faith in law supreme,
The continuity of nature; if it seem
That things called "supernatural" arise
They know a law still veiled from human eyes.
As yet we see but darkly, but we know
That law must still control the ebb and flow
Of all things, as it does the ocean tides;
Changeless, eternal law that still abides.
That that which is, has been, and still shall be
The same, to uttermost eternity.
This is the scientific faith, based on the truth
Of all that man has learned since reason's youth.

VII.

Is life worth living without after-life?
Is self-thought all that holds us to the strife?
Does love of wife or child give less delight
Because we fear to lose them in the night
Of unknown death?—Nay, rather "while we live
Take all the joys that death and life can give."
Not in the Roman singer's careless strain,
Nor even subtle Omar's deeper vein,
But in the higher thought that life is ours

To live completely, to use all the powers
Within us to make life of some avail
To self and others, if at last we fail
To carry self beyond the body's death
We still remain immortal in the breath
Of every word and act of ours on earth,
Whether or no we recognize their worth.
No shadow falls upon a human heart
But leaves eternal imprint of its part
In lessening life's essence for the race;
No ray of truth in thought but finds its place
In piercing some dark nest of ignorance foul,
And breeding truth within a human soul.
Not one, but many shadows make the night;
What myriad rays are needed for the light!

VIII.

Truth, like the universal force, is one.
Not for the keen-eyed intellect alone;
But for the feeling, and the moral sense
The steadfast duty, scorning consequence.
The right is truth, and beauty which appeals
To feeling, with its magic spell reveals
The way of truth, as when the sudden glow
Of summer lightning makes us swiftly know
The path we sought for in the murky night
With careful footing to the left and right.
Emotion and imagination play
The lightning's part along the mental way,
But when the flash is gone sure reason's tread
Must test the ground to which their light has led.
Too often 'tis a by-path where we stray
Far from the truth's direct and upward way.

IX.

Because we fear not hell nor dream of heaven
 Shall we pollute our souls with poisonous leaven
 Of luscious vice, that grows from sire to son,
 Retarding that evolving work begun
 When life—whate'er it be—took fleshly shape?
 Shall we degenerate to loathsome ape?
 Whole families of man have met this doom,
 And have been blotted out, to make more room
 For those whom nature's law selects as best
 To carry on that marvelous bequest
 That man shall slowly rise to higher power
 Of brain and heart. We cannot know what dower
 Of wisdom vast a future race may claim;
 We can be builders, with the lofty aim
 Of aiding, not retarding, nature's plan,
 Strangely foreseen in mythic devil's scan,
 When "Ye shall be as gods," he said to man.

X.

There is a beauty in the Christian's death.
 In sweet serenity of childlike faith
 He falls asleep upon a father's arm,
 With simple trust believing that no harm
 Can reach him through the strange dark hours of night,
 And that the Father's hand can make the light
 Spring up from some new sun of life, to shine
 In undiscovered realms of bliss divine.

But is this nobler than the death of man,
 Religion's orphan, who can only scan
 The past and present, but who cannot see
 Through the black veil that hides futurity?

No faith nor father offers promise sweet
Of life to come and recompense complete.
He only knows that law shall still prevail,
Nor plea nor pretext anywise avail.
Equal to either fortune, he awaits
The knowledge—or the silence—of death's gates.
He parts from life, the law of life obeyed,
Unknowing, unbelieving,—unafraid.

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